

The Tiny Truths of Little Things

By Karim Alrawi (Canada)

Substitute “novel” for “prose,” and we can say that a good novel echoes the spirit of the age and place in which it was written to a readership that may be contemporary to or distant from it in time and location. Stendhal’s *Charter House of Parma*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* grant us greater access to the 19th century than any historical account for being works imagined, reasoned, and felt—not just recorded. Neither numbers, nor data can convey the moral bankruptcy of the Vietnam War as surely as Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American*. The novel’s veracity exceeds that of any documentary or work of non-fiction for being embedded with characters that draw empathy from the reader to give life to the text.

Why do we judge Dostoevsky or Charles Dickens, for that matter, a greater writer than Zola, despite similarity of the worlds they describe? *Germinal* and *Nana* are great novels, but flawed by Zola’s Social Darwinism and pseudo-scientific ideas on human nature. His theories intrude and distort his perception. His witness is tainted. We mistrust him and his characters because we feel manipulated by him to make a point. And so, at times, he reads as false, maybe even dishonest, whereas Dostoevsky, for all his characters’ confusions and muddles, reads true. Though Dostoevsky’s redemptive Christianity does intrude to provide his characters with moments of epiphany, this usually only occurs at the end of the novels and in the form of a crisis leading to greater self-awareness. It seems rarely imposed by the author or extraneous to the character’s development.

So what then of Prose and Politics?

If writers are witnesses, answerable to future generations, as they are to their own, this implies a moral standpoint. Not the dead hand of codified lists of thou shalt this and not that on stone tablets issued from on-high, but a living morality that evaluates the hurt and damage in the hearts and minds of others: a morality of compassion—“passion” from the Latin “to suffer,” and so, compassion—to share the suffering of others through understanding and empathy.

In every great novel from *Don Quixote* to the present day, empathy is the path into the world of a novel. Empathy permits the reader to infuse characters with imagined life, to inhabit characters to such a degree that they can be understood and loved despite their flaws.

#

The twentieth century is replete with examples of the price paid by humanity for our its propensity for self-delusion under the influence of triumphant notions of class and race now monumentalized by the ruins of gulags, and concentration camps, as well as the images of mounds of skulls in Rwanda and Kampuchea. In place of the last century’s utopian nightmares of grandeur, whether of the right or the left, politics in this century has become a matter of expediency, of group management, of people as numbers that momentarily gain a voice and a face, as cases and clients, with the occasional right to mark a cross on a ballot paper.

These remain the two poles of our current politics: an irrational enthusiasm of dubious principle in the guise most often of racial superiority or religious righteousness, versus a numbing mass management by a bureaucracy of accountants. Both alternatives are toxic to a writer.

The best corrective to both is the compassion exercised by the writer as a free witness, and shared by the reader through their engagement with a text. It is in literary texts that our

humanity resides, awakened through the act of reading. To witness writing so as to write witness is a skill bred of experience and practice that requires engagement with the world uncompromised by the myopia of politics. It demands integrity, without which our humanity can only be diminished.

A writer's obligation, if obligation they have, is not to the big truths, if truths they are, of class conflict or Good versus Evil, but to the truth of the situations they write about, the tiny truths of small things— a fidelity to detail, as though seeing for the first time with the innocence of a child, as Tolstoy does in *Anna Karenina* or slightly askew, as Flaubert does in *Madam Bovary*—then let the reader draw conclusions that may lead to any greater truths, if greater truths there are.

When it comes to their writing, as much as writers should care about the world and engage with it on as many levels as possible, it is better that they remain unencumbered by political loyalties and unconstrained by political expediency. Their obligation is to witness the world with a clear eye and present a story that engages the reader that can live in memory— nothing less and nothing more.